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Puppetry and ambivalence in the art of Paul Nash

The idea of war as theatre is a frequently recurring metaphor, which draws in related images of play, gaming, dance and puppetry. Toy soldiers, *War Horse*, strategic board games, 'Two Little Boys,' paint ball, *Spacewar* (the first-ever video game) and, in the art of the First World War, the figure of the soldier entangled in barbed wire like a collapsed puppet, all invoke the slippage between conflict and performance, the field of battle and the stage, adult violence and child's play, the soldier and the marionette. The puppet analogy was used to deliberate, satirical effect in German art immediately after the First World War, and the articulation of the idea in Dada cabaret has generated a substantial literature.¹ I am interested in the less well-documented, but nonetheless pervasive, image of the marionette in British war art, and in the oblique and multifarious ways in which it manifests itself: in Paul Nash's lithographs of men marching through driving rain, CRW Nevinson's paintings of death in the trenches, the fragmented theatre of John Singer Sargent's *Gassed* (1919, The Imperial War Museum, London), the wooden revellers in Mark Gertler's *Merry-Go-Round* (1916, Tate Britain), and the clowns in Walter Sickert's *Brighton Pierrot* (1915, Tate Britain) dancing to the tune of gunfire from across the channel.

The references to puppets in British war art are in fact legion. Once the eye acclimatizes, they are everywhere, and the lack of critical attention begins to seem strange, particularly in comparison with the German material. My case here is that the very association with Germany, and with foreign culture more generally, makes puppetry a covert and ambivalent symbol in British art of the First World War. The implication, that a Germanic cultural tradition was allowed to infiltrate British war art, disrupts the story of art in Britain in the period, and demands to be tested across a range of material. In the space of this paper, I shall focus on the case of Paul Nash (1889–1946), a British official war artist, and his response to the experimental theatre designs of Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966), an ex-patriot English cosmopolitan who made his mark as a director in Berlin, and who played a key role in the reinvention of puppet theatre by the European avant-garde in the early twentieth centuries. I shall end with a reflection on the affinities between their work, and that of Gerry Judah (born 1951), a sculptor and stage-designer who becomes an actor in his own theatre of war, by making and then destroying miniaturized war zones.

Nash and Craig

In 1918, Nash made two lithographs that conjure up the horrific conditions for men fighting on the western front. In *Men Marching at Night* (fig. 1) and *Rain: Lake Zillebeke* (fig. 2), soldiers struggle against driving rain through a terrain that threatens to overwhelm them. The prints bear witness to what Nash called the 'frightful nightmare' of an obliterated landscape, in which men lived like rats in

¹ For example, Annabelle Melzer, *Dada and Surrealist Performance* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994). I thank Dorothy Price for her advice about the scholarship on puppetry in German art.

the trenches.² His war art presents us with the 'bitter truth' of war³ – the mud, the rain, the exhaustion – that he experienced first as a soldier, and then as an artist working on the front line for the government-sponsored official war art scheme. Yet for Nash, the reality of conflict in a machine age does not demand the sort of stylistic realism that marked Nevinson's later war art, or that bifurcates a painting such as Percy Wyndham Lewis's *A Battery Shelled* (1919, Imperial War Museum, London). In contrast to his own earlier, more romantic work, such as *Wittenham Clumps* (1912, Tate Britain), he uses a modernist technique of angular contours, simplified shapes and a strong, abstracting chiaroscuro to drive home his point.

The received story of Nash's transformation as an artist during the war turns on this sense of a natural alliance between the alien landscape of the Western Front, and the disorientating effects of modernist art, particularly as it was practiced by members of the London-based Vorticist group immediately before the outbreak of war and during the first, euphoric months of the conflict.⁴ In this narrative, the experience of war propelled Nash to the vanguard of British art, a position he was to retain throughout the interwar decades as a Surrealist and founder of the modernist group Unit One. Nash's own writings are used to support this version of events. In particular, his now-famous declaration, penned in autumn 1917 after a particularly traumatic expedition to the battlefields to gather material for his painting, that he was 'no longer an artist, interested and curious, but a messenger who will bring back word from men fighting to those who want the war to last forever', would seem to describe a Damascene conversion to a new style of modernist realism, and a repudiation of his previous, more aestheticising practice.⁵

However, there is a theatrical quality to Nash's war art that undercuts the legend of a break with his pre-war preoccupations. The desolate landscape of the lithographs could be read as a theatre, in which miniature puppet-men parade across a stage. We watch the drama from above like spectators in an auditorium, or like puppeteers. The path in *Rain: Lake Zillebeke* runs horizontally across the image like the front of a stage, its sheer edge suggesting the drop into an orchestra pit. There is an echo of Sickert's music-hall paintings, such as *Katie Lawrence at Gatti's* (1903, Art Gallery of New South Wales), with its view up to a central white patch across the choppy outline of spectators' heads. The single-file column of men in Nash's lithograph accentuates the flatness of the image, implying a lack of recession that turns the rear landscape into a vertical, painted backdrop. The rain which scores in continuous streaks across the surface of both works is a recurring device in war art from the period – think of Nevinson's *A*

² Paul Nash, letter to Margaret Nash, mid-November 1917, in Paul Nash, *Outline. An Autobiography and Other Writings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1949), 210.

³ Nash, *Outline*, 211.

⁴ This version of Nash's career is relayed, for example, by Richard Cork, *A Bitter Truth: Avant-garde Art and the Great War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 197.

⁵ Nash, *Outline*, 211.

Flooded Trench on the Yser (1916, Imperial War Museum, London)⁶ – yet Nash uses it to particular, dramatic effect, by attaching the rain-shafts to his toy soldiers, like puppet strings. His lighting is dramatic, the confusion of search lights in a war zone evoking the trickery of light and shade on stage. In *Men Marching*, the giant shadow cast by the lead figure makes a further allusion to theatre: to the well-used metaphor of the actor as shadow, to the shadow theatre which was so much in vogue at the turn of the twentieth century, and to a puppet master controlling his troupe. The lone figure stepping out in front grasps a walking stick which, in the hand of his shadow, adumbrates the strings of a marionette. The shadow-man haunts the image, a symbol, perhaps, of something larger and more sinister. He raises questions of authority and responsibility: who is the puppeteer at this time of war and what does he see?

When Nash looked back to the birth of British modernism in a memoir drafted at the end of his life, he gave short shrift to the factions that now shape our understanding of the period, and of his own turn to modernism during and after the war. Even as late as the spring of 1913, he insisted, Post-Impressionism had made little mark on the British art world, and there was as yet no inkling of Vorticism. Instead the scene was dominated by three men: the painter Augustus John, the sculptor Jacob Epstein, and Edward Gordon Craig. It was Craig who fired Nash's imagination. He was particularly struck by his ability to translate his artistic vision into actual theatre. 'Once I had seen his models I could believe unhesitatingly in his drawings', he explained. 'Seen alone, the latter often seemed too stylized, too exquisite to support a credible reality. The translations into three-dimensional buildings changed such a limited view.'⁷

The alternative canon of modern art that Nash delineates, and his account of 'reality' as an imagined scene made real on stage, suggests another way of reading the modernist realism of his own, often 'stylized', sometimes even 'exquisite', war art. Vorticism is not necessarily the most immediate reference. Instead, the memoir directs our attention to Craig's designs for a modern theatre: to etchings such as *Scene: 'Hell'* (1907, fig. 3), which bears a conspicuous family resemblance to Nash's war work. Craig's lighting is architectural. It builds the set through heavy contrasts of light and shade, or streams down in solid, diagonal lines which suggest an alternative inspiration for Nash's manner of depicting rain. Both artists use light to confuse our sense of place, to dislodge our footing. The camouflage pattern of light in Nash's landscapes creates an alien terrain, while Craig's actors seem to wander in a shadowy maze. Like Nash's landscapes, Craig's sets are dominated by massive uprights which loom over the miniature figures of his actors, or 'übermarionettes', as he termed them, with reference to his theory that all theatre should aspire to the condition of puppetry.⁸ A later statement by Nash confirms the association: 'I don't care for

⁶ Nevinson has been cited as a source for Nash's treatment of wartime landscape. See for example Cork, *A Bitter Truth*, 198-99.

⁷ Nash, *Outline*, 166-7.

⁸ Edward Gordon Craig, 'The Actor and the Übermarionette', dated March 1907, published in Edward Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre* (London: William Heinemann, 1911), 54-94.

human nature except sublimated or as puppets, monsters, masses formally related to Nature. My anathema is the human “close-up”’.⁹ His language here is infused with Craig’s campaign for a living puppet theatre that would subordinate the personality of the actor to the director’s overarching vision, and in which every element of the production would tessellate to produce a coherent whole, contributing equally to the projection of a single idea.

Nash never finished writing his memoirs. The fragment which remains ends mid-sentence, with a description of Craig holding court in 1913 at the Café Royal in London, sketching his ‘theatres in the air’ on the tablecloth, then settling in Italy, where he was surrounded by ‘a group of eager, slightly spellbound students...’¹⁰ There is a similar sense of hiatus in critical accounts of Nash’s response to Craig.¹¹ In most accounts, the story only picks up again after the war, when Nash tried his hand at set-design, and Craig wrote him a favourable review.¹² The paintings that Nash made of Dymchurch on the Kentish coast in the early 1920s have been linked to Craig, with their elongated vistas of the old seawall, although by that time, Nash had become disillusioned with his one-time hero, and what he called his ‘monomania’.¹³ There is a consensus that Nash moved on quickly from his youthful enthusiasm for Craig, shocked into maturity by his encounter with the reality of war, and then swept up by more radical forms of modernism, first Vorticism, then Surrealism.

However, his wartime writings tell a different story. Letters home from France are peppered with references to puppet theatre, in a way which suggests that Craig and his marionettes were fresh in his memory. In April 1917, he recounts an evening spent off-duty with friends, made memorable by ‘jam omelette, a bowl of chips and a bottle of wine, and a general discussion on the stage, Gordon Craig, and thence by inevitable corollary to sex and the Great Question which lasted us all the way home.’¹⁴ Breaking a rib becomes a moment of comic puppet theatre, as he accidentally stumbles into a trench ‘amid a roar of laughter’ from his comrades, and emerges ‘feeling rather as if I had broken in the middle like a

⁹ Paul Nash, letter to Martin Armstrong, 30 August 1926, quoted in Andrew Causey, *Paul Nash* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 167.

¹⁰ Nash, *Outline*, 173.

¹¹ For example, James King, *Interior Landscapes: A Life of Paul Nash* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 71-72; David Boyd Haycock, *Paul Nash* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 45; Andrew Causey, *Paul Nash* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 120-23. Anthony Bertram touches on the theatricality of Nash’s war art, but dismisses it as an ‘adventitious dramatic effect’ which detracts from the formalist patterning of his landscapes. See Bertram, *Paul Nash* (London: E. Benn, Ltd., 1923), 22.

¹² Edward Gordon Craig, ‘Theatre Craft. The Exhibition at Amsterdam. Example for Great Britain’, *The Times*, January 30, 1922, 8.

¹³ Paul Nash, letter to Gordon Bottomley, 20 March 1924, in *Poet and Painter: Being the Correspondence between Gordon Bottomley and Paul Nash, 1910–1946*, ed. Claude Collier Abbott and Anthony Bertram (London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1955), 177.

¹⁴ Paul Nash, letter to Margaret Nash, 26 April 1917, in Nash, *Outline*, 199.

doll.¹⁵ Trips to the music hall may have been in the back of his mind when he described the incident, particularly a performance by an actor known as Little Tich, which he recounts in his memoirs in the terms of puppet theatre. Little Tich was a dwarf with 'a face rather like Punch's', he tells us, and 'capable of the most absurd and alarming tumbles and gestures'.¹⁶ When he stumbles – as Nash stumbled in the trenches – 'his surprise and pain will be unbearably funny.'

The language of puppetry likewise seeps into Nash's description of a French cemetery, which immediately follows an account of a boisterous revue at a theatre in Rouen.¹⁷ He was impressed by the little wooden shrines constructed over the graves, each of which contained 'a little cherub doll upon a thread.'¹⁸ When the wind blew it 'set the cherubs flying gently over the wire trees and flowers'. Here he evokes the image of a marionette dangling and gyrating in a miniature theatre, with the wind as a perfect puppeteer, controlling the action completely unseen. He refers, perhaps, to the toy theatres that were a common feature of the Victorian nursery, or to the elaborate stage machinery that was used to create effects of flight on stage by hoisting actors aloft in harnesses, like living marionettes.

The extent to which the metaphor of war as theatre took root in Nash's mind comes across most overtly in an article which he wrote during his second period of employment as an official war artist, in World War Two. Here he describes the military planes that he painted as 'the real protagonists' of the conflict, who 'dominated the immense stage' of the war.¹⁹ The Benheim 'wears a mask' while the Wellington 'gets all the searchlight as it were.' The explicit nature of the metaphor here is important, particularly in an artist such as Nash, who was avowedly literary in his approach to art. 'I have seen the most frightful nightmare of a country ever conceived by Dante or Poe', he wrote in 1917, reaching instinctively for a literary precedent to articulate the 'unspeakable utterly indescribable' conditions that he encountered in France.²⁰ One of the qualities that he admired in Craig was what he called the 'abundant evidence of a poetic insight which enabled him to give an imaginative interpretation to drama'.²¹ Nash's sense of the poetic in art encourages us to extend the theatre metaphor of his 1942 article back to his earlier war work: to read the narrow walkway that crosses *Rain: Lake Zillebeke* horizontally as the front-edge of a stage; and the thick shafts of sunlight or searchlight in *The Menin Road* (1919, The Imperial War Museum, London) as spotlights on the stage of non-man's land.

Innocent puppets

¹⁵ Paul Nash, letter to Margaret Nash, 31 May 1917, in Nash, *Outline*, 205.

¹⁶ Nash, *Outline*, 170-71.

¹⁷ Paul Nash, letter to Margaret Nash, 26 February 1917, in Nash, *Outline*, 185.

¹⁸ Nash, *Outline*, 186.

¹⁹ Paul Nash, 'The Personality of Planes', *Vogue*, March 1942, reproduced in *Outline*, 248.

²⁰ Paul Nash, letter to Margaret Nash, mid-November 1917, in Nash, *Outline*, 210.

²¹ Nash, *Outline*, 167.

Two types of theatre intermingle in Nash's writings: the avant-garde puppetry of Craig and European modernism, and the vernacular puppetry of the fairground and nursery; and they bring into play conflicting associations. The new puppetry signaled the progressive cosmopolitanism of the Ballets Russes, notably the 1911 production of *Petrushka*, in which Vaslav Nijinsky danced the character of a fairground puppet with a living human soul.²² It suggested the subversive figure of the Bohemian artist, as celebrated by a young Pablo Picasso in his Harlequin paintings, and by the artists of the Nabis group, who set up their own marionette theatre in Montparnasse.²³ And it repudiated the materialistic excesses of a commercial theatre that had grown rich on a culture of virtuoso realism and celebrity actors. Folk puppetry, on the other hand, had come to signify childhood, and a bygone idyll of bucolic England. Their co-existence in Nash's thinking about the stage brings an ambiguity to bear on the puppet imagery in his war art, which unsettles any decisive reading of the work as promoting one or another view of the conflict.

When Nash was a child in the 1880s, England enjoyed a flourishing tradition of puppets and marionettes that performed in street booths, at seaside resorts and at village fairs.²⁴ Punch and Judy are the most famous native characters, but there were many others: damsels, knights and villains; animals, acrobats and dancing skeletons. Yet by 1914, demotic puppet shows had begun to die out, starved of their audience by more new-fangled forms of entertainment such as cinema, fairground rides and a hyper-realistic stage theatre. To represent the puppet in art was therefore to invoke layers of nostalgia for childhood, prelapsarian village life, and a dying folk tradition.

The war accelerated the decline, as puppet companies were broken up by the military mobilization of civilians. After the war, The playwright George Bernard Shaw commented on the situation when he wrote to one of the few surviving puppeteers to explain why he thought that puppetry might, in the end, survive. 'The cinematograph', he suggested,

which is said to be killing the dolls, is much more natural, and the result is that it has comparatively little effect on the imagination, but I shall not be surprised if in the long run it revives the puppet show instead of killing it, for it can never take its place.²⁵

²² See Martin Green and John Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot: The Commedia dell'Arte and the Modern Imagination* (New York: Macmillan, 1986); and Keith Tribble, ed., *Marionette Theater of the Symbolist Era* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002).

²³ Nicola Moorby, ' "Poor abraded butterflies of the stage": Sickert and the Brighton Pierrots', *Tate Papers*, no.5 (Spring 2006): 5-7, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/05/poor-abraded-butterflies-of-the-stage-sickert-and-the-brighton-pierrots>.

²⁴ On the rise and decline of the Victorian puppet theatre, see John McCormick, *The Victorian Marionette Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004).

²⁵ George Bernard Shaw, letter to Clunn Lewis, published in *World's Fair*, 18 March 1922, quoted in McCormick, *Victorian Marionette Theatre*, 82.

Note here the image of a machine killing something in human form. In 1922, when the letter was published, that metaphor would have evoked the killing machines of the recent war as the first industrialised conflict. The dichotomy that Shaw observes, between the naturalism of the cinema and the artificiality of the puppet theatre, runs through debates about puppetry throughout the period of its decline as a form of popular entertainment. The move to modernism suggested a route to survival, but it could not completely dispel the aura of a lost art. The puppet figures struggling through Nash's dystopian landscapes are the relics of a dying tradition, just as traditional England seemed doomed by the war. Both came under attack from the machinery of modern life, whether the machine of cinema or the machine of industrialised warfare.

The sense of a recent cultural loss mingles with a personal nostalgia for the children's model theatres that were so popular in the 1890s. An observation by the historians Martin Green and John Swan, that 'playing with them became as determining an experience for the aesthetes [...] as playing with soldiers was for the more military', points to the common ground shared by war and theatre in childhood games.²⁶ Nash's family certainly enjoyed their theatricals.²⁷ The figure of the puppet in his war art suggests a nostalgia for childhood – a lost time of innocence – that extends into a metaphor for the loss of men in the prime of youth on the battlefields, and for the lost innocence of a whole society through the experience of conflict. We might call to mind Rupert Brooke's votive offering of 'the red/ Sweet wine of youth', in a poem which gave voice to the excitement of the war in its early phases; or Wilfred Owen's later imprecation to 'fill these void veins full again with youth', as the war dragged on into disillusionment.²⁸

The association between war and puppetry flowed back again, into the world of theatre writing. When, in 1918, the critic Anne Stoddard commented on the puppet renaissance among the little theatres of New York, she explained it in terms of a war-weary civilization seeking to return to a lost childhood. 'Is it not interesting', she writes,

that this decade, which has brought upon us all the woe in the world, should have witnessed a revival which springs from the child heart of the race, and must inevitably appeal to those who are fortunate enough

²⁶ Green and Swan, *Triumph of Pierrot*, 66. See also Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 62-66.

²⁷ For Nash's childhood interest in model theatres, see Anthony Bertram, *Paul Nash: The Portrait of an Artist* (London: Faber, 1955), 30.

²⁸ Rupert Brooke, 'The Dead', written 1914, first published in the journal *New Numbers*, January 1915, and in Brooke, *1914 & Other Poems* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1915), 13. Wilfred Owen, 'The End', written 1916-18, first published in Wilfred Owen, *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983).

to have kept their simplicities? “The world is too much with us”; surely it is good to lose it for an hour in contemplation of this gentle art.²⁹

Among those who have remained thus young at heart is the artist, who becomes in this analogy an outgrown child with a tenuous grasp of reality. Another article, published in 1916, likewise singles out ‘children and artists’ as the most loyal audience for puppet shows, because both live in a world of fantasy.³⁰ Such an association raises questions about the function of realism in paintings by artists such as Nash. Are we asked to accept the actuality of his landscapes, on the basis of his adult authority as a witness to life on the front line? Or does he invite us to enter, with his puppet-men, into a child’s world of fantasy and nightmare? And has that nightmare indeed become a reality of its own, just as the puppet has become a living soldier?

Itinerant puppets

The puppet in English war art brings to mind homely and familiar pleasures that the conflict threatened to destroy. At the same time, it was flagrantly cosmopolitan, an exotic foreigner imported from Europe and, most dangerously, from Germany. There was an easy slippage between hostility toward Germany, and suspicion of foreignness in general. For instance, when the artist Mark Gertler (an East End Jew of Polish origin) exhibited a modernist interpretation of *The Creation of Eve* (1914, private collection) in London in 1915, the word ‘Bosch’ was scrawled across Eve’s stomach in protest.³¹ The suggestion of puppetry in pictures that had been commissioned as propaganda by the British government therefore presents a problem. It draws attention to the close connections between British and European art at a moment when the idea of a common European culture was under pressure; and it points to the sense of cultural kinship with Germany that many artists had worked to promote before the war, and worked just as hard to repudiate after 1914.³²

The puppet revival of the early twentieth century was self-consciously global. Contemporary accounts drew attention to its roots in ancient traditions from across the world: from Asia, China and Africa, as well as from the European middle ages; and they pointed out that in many of these regions, puppetry was still a living tradition.³³ Modernist puppetry was a pan-European phenomenon,

²⁹ Anne Stoddard, ‘The Renaissance of the Puppet Play’, *The Century Magazine*, 96/2 (June, 1918): 186.

³⁰ Inis Weed, ‘Puppet Plays for Children’, *The Century Magazine*, 91/5 (March 1916): 725.

³¹ John Woodeson, *Mark Gertler: Biography of a Painter, 1891–1939* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1972), 21.

³² See Grace Brockington, ‘“A Jacob’s Ladder between Country and Country”: Art and diplomacy before the First World War’, in *Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Grace Brockington (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 297–320.

³³ Weed, ‘Puppets Plays for Children’, 721–22. Stoddard, ‘The Renaissance of the Puppet Play’, 179–80.

and its proponents were scattered across the continent. Maurice Maeterlinck was Belgian, Alfred Jarry – French, Adolphe Appia – Swiss, and Craig an Englishman who left London in 1904, moving to Berlin and then to Florence because he could not find a backer in England. For followers such as Nash, Craig became a prince in exile. They kept track of his ideas through his journal *The Mask* (1908–29), his polemic *The Art of the Theatre* (1905), and exhibitions in London.³⁴ Like other cosmopolitans of the *fin de siècle*, such as Walter Sickert or James Abbott McNeill Whistler, he stood at an awkward remove to Britain, but served as a vital connection to the Continent. His decision to develop his career abroad gave his ideas a particular, talismanic significance for artists trying to find their way back to an Edwardian cosmopolitanism after the outbreak of war with Germany in 1914.

Germany was a centre for puppet theatre throughout the period under discussion, and a prime destination for an ambitious young director such as Craig. When the American director Maurice Browne wanted to incorporate European puppetry into the repertoire of the Chicago Little Theater, he looked especially to that country.³⁵ Munich was considered preeminent, with its two permanent puppet theatres, and plans to bring the Munich puppets to America were thwarted only by the outbreak of war.³⁶ The *Marionettentheater Münchner Künstler*, founded by Paul Brann in 1906, treated puppetry as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and employed well-known artists to work on every aspect of the production.³⁷ The collaborative nature of its work nurtured the emerging alliance between the art of puppetry and the visual arts. It was reinforced in numerous examples elsewhere, in the work of James Ensor at the *Petit Théâtre* in Brussels, Picasso's fascination with the Commedia dell'Arte, and the many artistic responses to the Ballets Russes.

Contemporary publications drew attention to the ways in which German puppeteers kept their practice alive during the war. The puppets that featured in the anti-war protests of the Dada cabaret are a key example, but there were others, such as a satirical puppet theatre in the Austrian city of Graz that lampooned wartime shortages and the abuses of hoarders and war profiteers.³⁸ Another company based in the Bohemian town of Hartenstein staged topical satires, and went on tour across Germany, reaching, we are told, 'even to the fighting lines.'³⁹ Soldiers of a Bavarian regiment set up their own 'Eastern Front Puppet Theatre'. It began as a private entertainment, a gesture of nostalgia for the puppet theatres of their childhood, but it became a runaway success and was sent by military command on an eight-week tour of the whole province. A memoir by the artist Hans Stadelmann, who founded the company, emphasizes

³⁴ Nash refers to these in *Outline*, 166.

³⁵ Weed, 'Puppets Plays for Children', 722.

³⁶ Stoddard, 'The Renaissance of the Puppet Play', 186.

³⁷ Helen Haiman Joseph, *A Book of Marionettes* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1920), 130.

³⁸ Max von Boehn, *Puppets & Automata* (New York: Dover Publications, 1972, 1st published 1929), 188-89.

³⁹ Boehn, *Puppets*, 190.

the difficult conditions in which they had to work, the courage it took to set up the theatre from scratch, the heroism, even, of their struggle to make art in the trenches, out of the raw materials of the battlefield.⁴⁰ A woollen helmet became a puppet cloak, parachute silk made a 'lovely' pair of trousers, dried peas substituted for buttons – only they had to be coated with turpentine or the rats would eat them. An abandoned dug-out served as a workshop. Often it was so cold, that the artist's colours would freeze to the brush.

Such a persistent tradition fed into the proliferation of puppet imagery in Germany art immediately after the war. For the Berlin Dadaist Raoul Hausmann, the puppet became a figure of healing, who could mend the ruptured relationship between past and present, contemporaneity and tradition:

If we have broken with the old world and cannot yet form the new, then satire, the grotesque, caricature, the clown and the puppet appear; and it is the deep meaning of these forms of expression, by demonstrating the puppet-like quality and the mechanization of life through apparent and real paralysis, that allows us to guess at and feel another life.⁴¹

In works such as Josef Scharl's *Fallen Soldier* (1932, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich) or Otto Dix's *Dance of Death, 1917* (1924, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra), the very material of the war becomes a metaphor for puppetry. Dead soldiers are entangled in barbed wire, like puppets in a tangle of strings. In Dix's title, the performance metaphor is explicit. In both English and German, the visual metaphor of puppetry is reinforced by verbal idioms such as 'dance of death' (*Totentanz*), 'theatre of war' (*Kriegsschauplatz*) and 'game of war' (*Kriegsspiel*).

The strength of German pride in its puppet theatre, and the Continental associations of the puppet revival, raise questions about the function of puppet imagery in work by British artists such as Nash; work that was, after all, funded by the government as part of its campaign of cultural propaganda against Germany. It should be acknowledged that there was scarcely any attempt by the Ministry of Information to doctor the art that it commissioned: quite the reverse. It understood that a display of liberality, as a contrast to German despotism, was perhaps the most powerful propaganda of all.⁴² Moreover, the artists it employed were often disillusioned with the war, and resistant to any direction from their employer. Yet the references to puppetry in the work, and its association with European modernism, complicate the possibilities of interpretation. Are we to understand that the avant-garde has been broken into submission by military discipline, led to the slaughter even, as suggested by the wire-festooned bodies in Nevinson's *The Harvest of Battle* (1919, Imperial War Museum, London)? Or should we infer a coded message about the survival of an anti-realist, modernist

⁴⁰ Hans Stadelmann, 'How our Marionette Theatre Started', in Boehn, *Puppets*, 194-202.

⁴¹ Raoul Hausmann, 'Die Neue Kunst', *Die Aktion* 11(14 May 1921): 19-20.

⁴² See Sue Malvern, *Modern Art, Britain and the Great War* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2004).

theatre, despite the pressure to conform and move on?⁴³ Both readings are possible, and they compete for our attention with sundry others, including the idea of the puppet as the relic of an English pastoral, or as an emblem of the soldier left dangling in a war that many believed had been mishandled.

The tenor of the analogy is indeterminate. It brings us no closer to an understanding of how modern art should behave when it becomes a witness to conflict, or who pulls the strings in the theatre of war. Rather, it perpetuates the essential ambivalence of the modernist puppet, its 'multivalent, sometimes ambiguous, sometimes paradoxical nature', as the theatre historian Keith Tribble described it. It was this very volatility that ensured its survival in the mercurial world of the European avant-garde.⁴⁴ Certainly for Craig, the metaphor of the marionette as soldier offered itself as yet another means to promote the puppet revival. In an article of 1921, he exploited it with relish, conjuring up an image of the puppet as England's saviour, 'coming in the nick of time to show the way once more to their old comrades the actors', stepping forward to 'hold the whole line' against attack, and to prove that he is 'the dearest of old comrades and not a hated enemy'.⁴⁵ Yet beside the suffering puppets of a Nash or a Nevinson, a Dix or a Scharl, the sentimental tone of Craig's conceit seems crass. For the war artist, the puppet's stubborn ambiguity, his withholding of explanation, makes a crucial point about a war that dragged on interminably, became increasingly tenuous in its moral justification, and failed to achieve any satisfactory resolution. That, surely, is what makes the figure of the puppet-soldier so potent – not just that its meanings are multiple, but that, in the context of war, the multiplicity of meaning is in itself subversive.

Coda: contemporaneity and tradition

The centenary of the First World War has generated a spate of newly commissioned war art and memorials, generating echoes across time between the visual traditions initiated by war artists such as Nash, and present-day responses to conflict. In 2014, the artist Gerry Judah installed a sculptural memorial in the nave of St Paul's Cathedral, London (fig. 4) which, together with his other projects on the theme of conflict, speaks with particular eloquence to the forms and ideas surrounding Nash's deconstruction of puppet theatre a century before. This is not to identify Nash as a direct source for Judah's work. Judah has himself insisted that he is not working within a tradition of war art, although he does draw attention to the causal relationship between the First World War and current conflicts in the Middle East.⁴⁶ It is to argue that the work itself can be seen to operate within such a tradition, and that the pervasive image

⁴³ I discuss the critical neglect of wartime experimental theatre in *Above the Battlefield: Modernism and the Peace Movement in Britain, 1900–1918* (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2010), 171–92.

⁴⁴ Tribble, *Marionette Theater*, xix.

⁴⁵ Edward Gordon Craig, 'Puppets and Poets', *Chapbook, A Monthly Miscellany* 20 (February 1921): 13.

⁴⁶ Hadani Ditmars, 'Prescient Landscapes and Fragile Architectures', *Wasafiri* 85 (March 2016), www.wasafiri.org.

of the theatre of war presents a way of bringing the historical and the contemporary into conversation.

Like Craig and Nash, Judah is a theatre designer as well as an artist in other media, and these parallel practices are closely linked in his oeuvre. As the writer Hadani Ditmars puts it:

He creates mini-sets, microcosms of imagined yet all too real worlds that are riveting psychic landscapes, foreign yet familiar. In many ways they are reminiscent of Victorian miniatures or dynamic dioramas which have been re-imagined for a modern world.⁴⁷

The 'psychic landscapes' and 'Victorian miniatures' of Ditmar's description reinforce the affinity that I trace here between Judah's sculpture and the toy theatres of Nash's battlescapes, as does her sense of a fundamental ambivalence in the work between real and imagined, foreign and familiar, historical and contemporary.

Judah himself draws an explicit connection between the theatre and his war art. In his words: 'the dramatic landscapes of India', where he spent his early years, and 'the ornate architecture of its temples, mosques and synagogues with their theatrical rituals' shaped the 'theatrical elements' of his later work.⁴⁸ His first studio was situated on Shaftesbury Avenue, in the heart of London's theatreland, and he financed his sculpture by working as a scenic artist for nearby productions. The experience of reaching large audiences through his work for theatre motivated Judah to develop a career in set design, and to seek out other unconventional settings for his sculpture and installations. St Paul's Cathedral offered just such an opportunity for massive public exposure, and for displaying his work in the midst of the ritualistic performance of religious ceremony.

Judah came to the subject of war through a commission from the Imperial War Museum, London, to make a model of the selection ramp in Auschwitz Birkenau for the permanent Holocaust Exhibition (2000). Sculpted out of white gesso, the model reconstructs the terrain and architecture of the camp, and the process by which prisoners were selected for immediate death or hard labour. Judah was not himself a witness to the Holocaust, but he drew as far as possible on the authority of witness accounts: on the sorts of letters, memoirs and visual documentations that circumscribe Nash's war art. In particular, he used a rare set of photographs taken by the SS on 22 May 1944, to reenact the movement of prisoners through the camp: disembarking from the train, queuing for selection, and marching in columns to the crematoria or to work.⁴⁹ The model is populated with thousands of miniature people, grouped together in different configurations along the length of the model, much like a scene from a toy theatre, or a director's blocking design.

⁴⁷ Ditmars, 'Prescient Landscapes'.

⁴⁸ 'Gerry Judah: biography', www.judah.co.uk.

⁴⁹ Gerry Judah, 'Holocaust Exhibition', *The Jewish Magazine*, July 2000, www.jewishmag.co.il.

In related projects, Judah reiterates this painstaking exercise in reconstruction, creating miniature models of contemporary sites of conflict: Baghdad and Aleppo, Beirut and Jenin. The difference is that he also destroys them, reenacting the explosions and demolitions that have made such cities a byword for the ravages of war. At exhibitions such as *Motherlands* (2007) and *Babylon* (2010), his sculptural ruins were hung precipitously on gallery walls, bombsites transfigured into luminous white objects of enormous intricacy and fragility. In St Paul's, he installed two enormous plaster crosses in the cathedral naïve, ambivalent symbols of Christian redemption, violent death, and massed military graves. The surface of each is decorated with ruined tower blocks which function as a universal symbol, evocative of bombed-out cities across the Middle East, the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and modern urban degradation.⁵⁰

Judah's ruinous cityscapes are unpopulated. There are no miniature people, nothing that directly invokes the puppet-worlds of Nash's battlefields, or Craig's model theatres. The connection that I draw here between tradition and contemporaneity works through the motif of the broken wire in its various manifestations: as the barbed wire of the trenches and concentration camps, the wires that manipulate or entangle marionettes, and those that twist through Judah's ruins. His model buildings are held together with steel rods, and festooned with power lines and telecommunications cables. It is this framework of wiring that largely survives the process of demolition, and that gives the final structure its distinctive appearance. The spikes that sprout from Judah's 'three-dimensional paintings' seem crystalline in their whiteness, sharp and brittle as icicles or stalactites. They suggest natural forms as much as man-made structures, landscape as much as architecture. As such, they call to mind Nash's shattered landscapes, with their splintered, standing tree trunks and brilliant explosions, like aerial flowers. The similarity comes into focus through Nash's painting *Wire* (1918, fig. 5), with its bomb-blasted tree, upright against a flattened landscape, and crowned, Christ-like, with barbed wire.⁵¹ For both artists, wire is a fact of war, but it is also a metaphor: for reality and performance, chaos and control, destruction and redemption. The juxtaposition of their work in the expanded tradition of war art serves to bring home the coexistence of these metaphors, and the crucial ambiguities that they generate.

⁵⁰ Judah, quoted in Ditmars, 'Prescient Landscapes'.

⁵¹ Cf. the writer Michael Glover's description of Judah's ruined cities with their 'lengths of electricity cables, stretched and twisted like barbed wire, or some martyr's crown of thorns'. Glover, 'Horror of War in Sharp Relief', *The Independent*, 9 November 2005.